

STOP, READ THIS

The 14th of February 2000 was National Condom Awareness Day. In the United States, one in five people have had a sexually transmitted infection (STI). In Baltimore, the incidence of gonorrhea is eight times the national rate and syphilis 30 times. Washington D.C. has similar problems. Many of these STI's could have been prevented with the use of condoms.

An intact latex condom prevents the transfer of semen, vaginal fluid and other fluids from one partner to the other by acting as a barrier. It helps prevent pregnancy, a person from contracting AIDS, syphilis, gonorrhea, chlamydia, hepatitis, and other STI's. However, areas that are not protected by a condom are still susceptible. For example, herpes or genital warts that are contracted by direct contact can be transferred from one partner to another if the infected site is located in an area other than where the condom is used. Condoms are one of the best products for preventing sexually transmitted infections.



Condoms have improved over the past few years and are quality tested. Most condoms are made of latex. Latex is a liquid that comes from rubber trees. Since HIV/AIDS first surfaced, research has been conducted to improve the safety and efficacy of latex condoms. Condoms are considered medical devices and are regulated and tested by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Each condom is tested on an assembly line where it is fitted onto an electrically charged metal form. If pinholes are present, sparks are emitted and the condom is rejected. Condom testing can detect holes smaller than the diameter of a single strand of hair. Condoms can also be air tested, in which air is slowly filled into the condom until it breaks. A regular sized condom must hold a minimum of 16 liters of air (roughly four gallons). If more than 1.5% of condoms fail in a given batch, the batch is destroyed. In the United States less than two out of 100 condoms break during actual use.

Condoms can be highly effective for pregnancy prevention. If condoms are used routinely and correctly, only two-three women out of 100 will become pregnant over the course of a year. Compared to one out of 100 women getting pregnant yearly from the pill, sterilization, hormonal injection or implants. When condoms do fail, it is often the user's fault due to improper or incorrect use. Today, well over 60% of men do not use a condom correctly.

People can make many mistakes using condoms, potentially resulting in STI's. Inconsistent use and improperly applying the condom is a major mistake. Condoms can be weakened by exposure to heat or sunlight or by age, and can tear if the package is opened with teeth or fingernails. Condoms are good for five years after the manufacturing date if stored correctly. Condoms lubricated with spermicide may remain good for only two years. Always check the expiration date and never use a condom if it has expired.

Did you know that oil-based products immediately create holes in latex? According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), within as little as 60 seconds of exposure, a 90% decrease in latex strength will occur. Oil-based lubricants products such as baby oils, cold cream, hand lotion, and petroleum jelly or other petroleum products, weaken a latex condom and should be avoided. Only water-based products should be used, like K-Y jelly® and Lubrin®.

For people allergic to latex, a polyurethane condom should be used. Avoid using Lambskin condoms, which are made from animal membranes and are very porous. These pores are small enough to stop a sperm but not HIV, hepatitis virus or the herpes virus.

Pregnancy prevention, and STI's, including HIV infection, are preventable, and condoms represent an effective prevention tool. For more information about condoms and STIs contact

Community Health Nursing, Preventive Medicine Service at 202-782-3964. Free literature, condom samples, individual counseling, and confidential HIV testing are also available. We are located on the 3rd floor of building 1, Walter Reed Army Medical Center, room B303. *The use of trade names is for identification only and does not imply endorsement by Preventive Medicine Service, Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

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